



2017

— CLARITY INDEX —



CANADA GOVERNMENT

WEBSITE CLARITY INDEX

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The VisibleThread Clarity Index, Canadian Government Websites -- 2017

Executive Summary

Communication is the connective fabric between a democratically elected government and its citizens. Clear communication is critical when there is a large geographic area to govern. It is even more so when there are two official spoken and written languages. Clear writing is the anchor of these communications and will influence their effectiveness. When communication is poor, the cost of government increases and service delivery programs fail. With clear communication, governments can increase efficiencies and deliver on its citizen’s expectations.

The Canadian Government operates through a centralized federal government, along with provinces, territories and municipalities. They are geographically and culturally diverse. English and French are both considered official languages. Education levels vary widely throughout the country. These factors make it important to use clear language. Canada recognized these challenges. The nation implemented plain language standards in 2006 to account for these differences. Continued revisions to the standards process have consistently been on the side of clarity and accessibility. (1) Three rules guide Government written communications:

- Supports users in completing tasks
- Supports audience needs
- Provides an equivalent experience to the user in both official languages (2)

But there is still room for improvement.

VisibleThread focused on 20 websites for this index, split evenly between Canadian municipalities and provincial governments (along with the Federal website). These websites cover the span of country, from Montreal to the Yukon territory. Canada varies widely in population densities. We measured websites across these four dimensions (internationally accepted norms relating to clear language):

- [Readability](#) – How readable is the content?
- [Passive Language](#) – Active Language communicates clearly. What proportion of sentences is passive?
- [Long Sentences](#) – What proportion of all sentences are too long?
- [Word Complexity Density](#) – Complex words make web pages hard to understand. Density rating is the percentage of complex words relative to total word count.

What did we find?

Analysis suggests copy on Canada’s government websites could improve. In most cases, small improvements in specific areas would improve clarity. There are only a few in the sample that need significant help across all areas. With average scores for copy at college levels, many citizens will have difficulty engaging. This is compounded by the lowest rankings being in the more disbursed, less modernized regions.

A more detailed analysis appears below in this report.

Key Findings

Clear Language:

The following guideline definitions will help you understand the information we present in the Key Findings section:

- Readability – a score of 50 or above is ideal.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Complex language density – complex words/total words*100 – lower is better.

You can find detailed definitions of ranking criteria in the Methodology section.

Top Performers

The websites for **Montreal, Quebec City** and the **City of Hamilton** took the Top 3 spots on the index. There was only a 3.75-point separation between Montreal (2.5) and Hamilton (6.25) on the Clear Writing Index. We ranked the top performers based on scores below 7 on the Clear Writing Index.

- The City of Montreal had the best average Clear Writing Index score (2.5) across the entire index.
- All Top 3 performers were municipal websites.
- Top Performers all came in under 5% in their use of passive language.
- Only 0.03% separates Montreal from Quebec City in a measure of Complexity.
- The City of Hamilton ranked #1 in both Readability and Long Sentence use.
 - <http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/> (1)
 - <http://ville.quebec.qc.ca/en/> (2)
 - <https://www.hamilton.ca/> (3)

VisibleThread™ Web Index		Canadian Government		Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
Rank	City	URL	Index		Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
1	City of Montreal	http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/	2.5	52	2	1%	1	16%	6	0.47	1	53265			
2	Quebec City	http://ville.quebec.qc.ca/en/	5	47	9	1%	2	16%	7	0.50	2	48346			
3	City of Hamilton	https://www.hamilton.ca/	6.25	58	1	4%	3	8%	1	6.99	20	187746			

Notable Mentions

Agencies that maintained Readability levels below college reading levels: Writing levels should be at 50 or above to adequately serve the public interest. Only one website in this category reached this benchmark (**City of Winnipeg – 50**). But there were five other websites that came within 1-2 points of 50. They can easily reach this goal with some minor refinements of language, especially in sentence length.

- <http://www.winnipeg.ca/> (9)

VisibleThread™ Web Index		Canadian Government		Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
					Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	
4	Nunavut Govt	http://gov.nu.ca/	200	7	48	5	6%	5	16%	4	2.44	14	49414		
5	City of Vancouver	http://vancouver.ca/	200	7.25	48	5	8%	9	18%	11	1.62	4	74033		
6	Nova Scotia Govt	https://novascotia.ca/	200	7.75	48	5	8%	8	14%	2	2.72	16	46748		
7	City of Ottawa	http://ottawa.ca/en	201	8.5	45	10	8%	7	22%	14	1.56	3	231839		
8	City of Edmonton	https://www.edmonton.ca/	200	8.75	48	5	10%	12	16%	5	2.41	13	85070		
9	Federal Govt	http://www.canada.ca	202	9.25	45	10	5%	4	27%	18	2.04	5	132074		
9	City of Winnipeg	http://www.winnipeg.ca/	200	9.25	50	3	11%	16	15%	3	2.46	15	70706		
11	City of Mississauga	http://www.mississauga.ca/	200	9.5	45	10	10%	11	18%	10	2.12	7	74983		
12	Manitoba Govt	https://www.gov.mb.ca/	200	9.75	49	4	10%	14	23%	15	2.10	6	65467		

Room for Improvement:

6 out of 20 sampled websites have room for improvement. Clear Writing Index scores for this group range from 12.75 to 14.25. All of them suffer from low readability scores, long sentences and complexity.

VisibleThread™ Web Index		Canadian Government		Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
					Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	
13	BC Govt	http://www2.gov.bc.ca/	201	12.75	42	14	8%	10	18%	8	3.46	19	53488		
14	City of Toronto	http://www.toronto.ca/	43	13	42	14	11%	17	18%	9	2.29	12	28427		
15	Yukon Govt	http://gov.yk.ca/	200	13.25	38	17	7%	6	33%	20	2.23	10	87653		
16	Alberta Govt	https://www.alberta.ca	200	14	36	20	11%	15	20%	12	2.19	9	57380		
17	Newfoundland Labrador Govt	http://gov.nl.ca/	200	14.25	38	17	10%	13	24%	16	2.26	11	42566		
17	City of Kitchener	http://kitchener.ca/en	200	14.25	42	14	13%	18	25%	17	2.13	8	60201		

Worst Performers

Saskatchewan Government and **Prince Edward Island Government** were our two poorest performers. They ranked in the bottom third across all dimensions. Language is what connects government to its citizens. When citizens have lower than average educational and reading comprehension levels, it is even more important for governments to communicate in plain and clear language. For instance, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island are both near the bottom in Canada's Child Poverty Index. (3,4) Improvements in how they communicate should be part of poverty-reduction efforts to connect people to services.

VisibleThread™ Web Index		Canadian Government		Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
		Index	Score		Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank		
19	Saskatchewan Govt	http://www.saskatchewan.ca/	200	15.5	43	13	15%	19	20%	13	2.93	17	104547		
20	Prince Edward Island Govt	http://www.gov.pe.ca/	200	18.5	38	17	16%	20	30%	19	3.16	18	61620		

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- Overuse of Passive Tense: Both members of this category ranked last in use of passive tense. This can lead to reader confusion. An active voice gives readers forward direction. Changes in tense use can improve website readability.
- High proportion of long sentences: Long sentences (20% and 30% respectively) make the task of reading more complex. For example, the Saskatchewan Government ranked 19 out of 20 in this category as a result of content like this:

“It is important to us that claimants receive eligible financial assistance as quickly as possible. Wherever possible, PDAP tries to avoid potential delays where coordination with private insurance policies might be involved. As part of the claim approval process, PDAP will require a coverage denial letter from your insurance company. However, we do not want this requirement to delay your application and processing of your claim.”

- High level of complexity: Please note the sample above. It is not only long, but overly complex. Areas such as these which suffer from high poverty and lower education rates must pay attention to the message being delivered. Reducing complexity will enhance accessibility.

Takeaways:

1. Not a wide variance between best and worst performers

There is not a wide variance between the best and worst performers. Of indexed sites, the margin from first to worst is 16 points on the readability index. While this does show room for improvement, it fares well when compared to other VisibleThread government website audits.

- In this Index, there are three websites that rank as Top Performers.
- Those in the “Notable Mentions” category make progress on readability by reducing sentence length and complexity.
- Agencies in the “Needs Improvement” and “Worst Performers” categories have a clear opportunity to improve communication by focusing on key aspects of plain language.

2. Municipalities rate higher than provinces/territories

Overall, municipal websites performed better than provincial/territory sites. Average Clear Writing Index score for municipalities was 8.4. The average Clear Writing Index score for provinces/territories was 12.2.

- Seven of the Top 10 websites belonged to municipalities.
- It is important to maintain the principles of Plain Language Use as government increases in size.

3. Complexity is not necessarily a predictor of readability

The City of Hamilton ranked in the Top 3 Performers with a Clear Writing Index score of 6.25. They also had the best Readability score at 58. However, they also had the highest complexity score at 6.99. This was 3.53 points higher than the second worst score. This shows that adhering to plain language principles across the other dimensions can make even complex material readable.

4. Canada's Federal Government can make some easy improvements

Canada's Federal website ranked right in the middle of the pack with a 9.25 Clear Writing Index score. They are also close to recommended levels for Readability (45) and use of Passive Voice (5%). Their biggest weakness is using long sentences, which they used in 27% of indexed text. They can improve readability by cutting down on the length of sentences.

Detailed Results Tables

We show the full detailed tables below.

We color-code, green to red, each score in the Index. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. Flagging specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

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					Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score		
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9	City of Winnipeg	http://www.winnipeg.ca/	200	9.25	50	3	11%	16	15%	3	2.46	15	70706	Room for Improvement		
11	City of Mississauga	http://www.mississauga.ca/	200	9.5	45	10	10%	11	18%	10	2.12	7	74983			
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Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analyzed the sites in March, 2017.
- We scanned up to 100 pages of content using automated crawling techniques. In some cases, we found less than 100 pages, so we included the page count and word count for each agency.
- We crawled starting from the publicly available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample of 100 contain non-textual content (e.g.: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.

We calculated the index based on 4 metrics. Each metric contributes equally to the final score. The metrics are:

Metric	Formula
1. Readability Readability ranges from 1 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 50. This is based on the Flesch Reading Ease index.	$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$
2. Passive Language The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject acted upon appears before the verb. For example: "Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality" If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength. You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action?	$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$
3. Long Sentences The % rating is the proportion of sentences that are longer than 25 words. Long sentences mask multiple concepts. Splitting up these sentences will result in a clearer message.	$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

4. Complex Word Density

The density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to the total word count. This scan looks for complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/implewords.cfm> for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content.

(Complex Words/Total Words * 100)

About VisibleThread

VisibleThread helps executives in large organizations govern content quality with less cost and risk. Sales and marketing teams in diverse industries use our technology to improve many functions, including proposal development, contract review and brand audits. Our software finds brand compliance, poor readability and other issues in websites and documents. Unlike consumer-grade analysis tools, VisibleThread processes hundreds of documents and web pages in minutes. Fuelled with greater organizational intelligence, customers drive efficiency and reduce cost across their organizations. For more information, visit www.visiblethread.com

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For a specific agency or bureau index, email: sales@visiblethread.com
- For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: support@visiblethread.com
- For inquiries from members of the press or media, email: charles.farrell@visiblethread.com

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- (1) <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30682#appD>
 - (2) <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html>
 - (3) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/sask-child-poverty-rates-among-highest-in-canada-1.3865776>
 - (4) <http://www.cwp-csp.ca/resources/resources/prince-edward-island-poverty-progress-profile-2016>